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Where There's a Will, There's a Way: The Case for Greater Cooperation between Russia and the EU in Central Asia

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This blog is based on a Policy Brief published in the UNU-CRIS Policy Brief series.

Read The Perks of an Unlikely Couple: Why Cooperation between the EU and Russia in Central Asia is Worth

Considering now at <http://cris.unu.edu/unlikely-couple-central-asia> (<http://cris.unu.edu/unlikely-couple-central-asia>)

If one starts from the observation that the European Union (EU) and Russia have a common interest in a stable, prosperous and secure Central Asia, then the question arises – why they would not consider joining forces in order to help make Central Asia thrive and prosper? The answer seems obvious – not only do their bilateral relations remain at an all-time low, they also share a lack of trust and have a mutual suspicion of each other's goals and involvement in a region which Russia still considers its backyard and crucial to ensure its great power status.

Despite these seemingly insurmountable obstacles to collaborating, the idea of possible cooperation in Central Asia should not be disregarded so easily. There are a number of specific policy areas where cooperation between the EU and Russia holds significant potential in terms of contributing to the stability and prosperity of the region. Moreover, the EU's and Russia's objectives and interests in Central Asia collide to a much lesser extent than in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Central Asia is not a strategic priority for the EU, and it does not have the ambition to become a leading actor in the region. Therefore, both the EU and Russia have shown some willingness to cooperate in light of their overlapping interests in specific areas.

Converging Interests

The interests of the EU and Russia in Central Asia converge to the extent that they both want Central Asia to be a stable, secure and prosperous region. Moreover, both actors have an interest in containing security threats in the region, which is reflected in their involvement in the spheres of border management, anti-drugs trafficking, environmental protection, counterterrorism and prevention of radicalisation. Although having converging interests is not a sufficient condition for possible collaboration, it does raise the question whether cooperation is possible.

Formally, there is currently no cooperation between the EU and Russia in Central Asia. However, there is an ongoing dialogue on Central Asia between EU and Russian officials at various levels in the form of an exchange of information, with an example being that during the preparation of the EU's new strategy for Central Asia (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/17/central-asia-council-adopts-a-new-eu-strategy-for-the-region/>), the EUSR briefed his Russian counterparts on several occasions. The question is whether these contacts could go a step further and result in effective cooperation on the ground.



Is Cooperation Possible?

There is a widely held perception (including among Russian policymakers) that the EU does not want to cooperate with Russia. While it is true that the EU remains cautious about the idea of cooperating with Russia, from an EU perspective there are, in fact, two key factors that in principle make cooperation with Russia in Central Asia possible.

First, based on interviews I have conducted with EU officials, it is clear they believe it would be in the EU's interest to cooperate with Russia in Central Asia. They think that cooperation would be beneficial in certain areas where both the EU and Russia are active, such as border management (<https://www.bomca-eu.org/en/>) and drug trafficking, and they acknowledge that joining forces would amplify the likelihood of having a positive and lasting effect compared to when both parties act separately.

These acknowledgements are in line with what is laid down in the so-called "selective engagement" principle, which is one of the five principles ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2018\)614698](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2018)614698)) that currently determine the EU's position towards Russia. Although the first of these five principles explicitly links any substantial cooperation with Russia to progress in terms of implementing the Minsk agreements ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/614737/EPRS_ATA\(2018\)614737_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/614737/EPRS_ATA(2018)614737_EN.pdf)), the 'selective engagement' principle allows for cooperation with Russia in areas of common interest. Given the overlapping interests of the EU and Russia in the region, Central Asia has emerged as a region where the principle of selective engagement could be applied, and thus where the EU could agree to cooperate with Russia in those areas that are of interest to the EU.

A second factor that points to the possibility of cooperation with Russia can be found in the new EU strategy for Central Asia (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/17/central-asia-council-adopts-a-new-eu-strategy-for-the-region/>), which was launched in May 2019. A key element of the new strategy is the aim to forge what it labels a "non-exclusive"

partnership with the countries of Central Asia. This means that the EU is ready to establish new synergies and strengthen existing synergies with other external actors active in the region. The new EU strategy thus leaves an important opening for possible cooperation with Russia, even if Russia is not mentioned explicitly in the strategy.

Roadblocks on the Path to Cooperation

Although there are several areas that hold considerable potential for possible cooperation between the EU and Russia in Central Asia, it is important to be realistic about the likelihood of cooperation materialising in the short term, as a number of persistent obstacles seem to stand in the way.

First, despite the ongoing dialogue and exchange of information on Central Asia between EU and Russian officials at various levels, there is a serious lack of trust between both sides, which undermines any attempt to cooperate. Both actors perceive each other not only as possible partners in the region, but also as potential spoilers.

Moreover, despite EU cooperation with Russia in Central Asia being formally possible based on the EU's principle of selective engagement and its ambition of having a non-exclusive partnership with Central Asia, some EU member states interpret the principle of selective engagement with Russia in a very restrictive manner, even excluding practical cooperation in areas where there is a clear common interest, such as in the Arctic. (https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Analysis_In_Search_of_a_European_Russia_Strategy.pdf)

Another obstacle to cooperation is the abundance of (highly effective) misinformation and fake news on the EU, which is being spread in Central Asia through Russian popular and social media. As these fake narratives are negatively affecting perceptions of the EU amongst the Central Asian population, this situation is obviously not conducive for any attempt at building trust between the EU and Russia. Common narratives include that of 'Gayropa' and that of the EU being in a state of perpetual crisis.



Meeting on the Common Ground

While the persistent barriers for cooperation described above may instil little hope that cooperation between the EU and Russia will materialise in the short term, it is nevertheless important to keep in mind that in a number of specific policy areas cooperation between the EU and Russia holds significant potential, in terms of contributing to the stability and prosperity of the region, because of the strong complementarity of their expertise and capabilities.

This is also why both EU and Russian officials believe that it would be beneficial to cooperate in Central Asia.

In my latest policy brief (<http://cris.unu.edu/unlikely-couple-central-asia>) for UNU-CRIS, I outline four areas that stand out as possible spaces for cooperation between the EU and Russia in Central Asia, and outline four policy recommendations that would bring both sides closer together.

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